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Four Quarters





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Seance

GARY FINKE

The first fire of fall,
Listening for the voice
Of the friend who was
Highway-killed: silence,
The night opening
The door, holding its shoes.

The damp smell of certainty,
The wet basement a character
In a recurring dream that
Fails like brakes or reflexes
Or the luck that steers through
Slick curves: quietly rising,
The newspaper logs taking
Their fragmented stories outside.

Christmas, Coffman's Farm

ROY BENTLEY

North corner of the near field,
abandoned grain-barn, Ford tractor on blocks.
Nearer the house by a cistern, three
snowmen it took ladders to finish,
biggest with a smile half its face.
Across the yard, in porchlight,

cats claw each other for a half-plate of chicken,
snow flying the few minutes it takes
the big Gray to win out.
Year-old child presses against doorglass,
claps his hands. In the kitchen
his mother to a man next to her:
"Told you they's hungry."

Last of the sun warm on the door,
cat comes quiet to the porch, raises itself
even with the child. At the glass small mouths open.
Steam catches the sound.

Floors

STARKEY FLYTHE

MILLICENT WORKS for an interior decorator while her husband is studying to be a landscape architect. She is paid the minimum wage, which does not include money for gasoline or the use of her car when she goes out on commissions or trips to pick up fabric samples and accessories from the supply houses.

"She ought to pay you for that," Millicent's husband, Hunter, tells her as he leaves to drive to school; she will have to walk to work.

"I haven't been working with her long enough to tell her," Milly says. "It's our only income. I don't want to kill it before you get your degree or get started!"

He looks at her, trying to decide whether he should feel pressure or guilt. She moves slightly, handing him his lunch bag, and he sees his stomach in the little mirror she has made out of glass and reflecting paper. "I better start jogging! I'm cutting third period to go home. Be back tonight, no later than seven-thirty. I have to see about the extension on the school loan at the bank. Tomorrow's the last day. If I don't go today, I won't go tomorrow!"

"Are you going to see about the house? The rent check didn't come yesterday. It's the fifth of the month."

They have bought a house in their home town which even in today's eager real estate market can only be described as a white elephant. It is rented to four nurses who do not keep it as clean as Millicent and Hunter would like. Still, they put their home in front of their relationship as the ultimate reason for the thin time they are having now. Often Milly will say, "I think this material will look good on the sofa at home, don't you?" And he will embrace her. He talks the same way about the rare plants he studies. Other than this common interest, they feel their marriage is an obligation that may not last through the two more years of school. Hunter thinks it would've lasted forever if he hadn't made the decision to change his vocation, but he was miserable selling stocks and bonds. Millicent tries to think this time will strengthen their marriage, but she is not always sure.

"Please don't wander around the backroads on your way home tonight looking for plants. It's getting dark really early."

"I'll be here in time to go to the grocery. I'll bring the rent check. We'll treat ourselves to some FOOD!"

THE WOMAN MILLY WORKS FOR, Combma Heath, does not call herself an interior "designer," or worry about the frivolity associated with the trade. Milly suspects her of being a Christian in the sense she would use that as an excuse for not doing something ordinarily reasonable. She once saw a Bible open on top of a stack of wallpaper books, and the man Combma is living with, Heck Bostrom, who is helping her fix up her house, which is also the shop, strikes Milly as someone who would put up his arms and wiggle them around at a prayer meeting. She heard him humming a hymn one morning.

Fifty years ago Combma's house would've been called a shack, but with living space scarce at the university and young couples house-hungry, it has taken on a certain smartness. Combma has painted the mullions of the windows a deep red so that in certain lights they seem to disappear, evoking the same spirit of the past that so moves Hunter when he sees a deserted house on a lonely country road where he can search for out-of-fashion shrubs that commercial nursery houses no longer supply. He and Milly want to open a business called *House & Garden* when he finishes school. "Don't worry," he always says to Milly, "if I'm not back when I should be." Combma has said to Milly that Hunter is like a vine, jessamine or wild honeysuckle, that will never grow in the right place, is always wandering around where it shouldn't be in the garden.

Milly tells Combma that she can't go out to Lake Lyndon to match up some paint chips with the carpet being put in that day because Hunter has the car.

"Very thoughtful of him," Combma says. "He could've gone on the weekend. I suppose you'll have to take a taxi!"

Milly goes back into the sample room to get the paint chips and sees Heck Bostrom naked, lying in the antique four-poster bed she has always wanted for her and Hunter's old house but which Combma, in order to keep or make it worthwhile to sell, has a \$1,095. dollar price tag on.

"What time is it?" asks Heck, who is waking up.

"Nine-fifteen," Milly says quickly walking out of the room and closing the door.

"The taxi's here!" Combma shouts. "You got your samples and things?" She sees what has happened, goes into the room and scowling at Milly as if she has provoked Heck, brings the paint

chips and fabric swatches out herself. "Do you have any money for the cab?"

Milly wants to say, No, but she is slightly afraid of the big woman. "Yes."

"Well, go on! They charge you for waiting. Maybe you can hitch a ride back with the carpet people." She pushes Milly out the door. Seated in the cab, Milly sees Heck through the window, standing up, yawning, stretching, the hair of his groin and chest and underarms dark and strange.

"**T**HAT'LL BE twenty-one dollars," the cab driver says when they arrive at the lake.

"What?" It has been years since she's taken a taxi any distance, so she is surprised by the amount. She reaches into her coat pocket for the money, Hunter's legacy to her before he went off, money she makes that she gives him and he gives her back. She has forgotten an overripe banana she grabbed for breakfast, expecting to eat it on her walk to work. During the twenty-one dollar ride she has been sitting on it. The dollar bills, eleven ones and a five, are covered with banana mush.

"What's this?" the driver asks.

Milly apologizes, giggling, "Oh, I'm sorry. I'll take it inside and launder it."

"You going to print it too? This is only \$16!"

"Just wait a minute!"

She goes inside and looks around. Combma has cautioned her never to use the word "taste" on a job, only the word "sense," as in, "It wouldn't make good sense to put that color next to this one," or, "That makes good sense, that cloth. It wears like iron." But in this house nothing seems sensible, or tasteful. The couple building the house have had such fun choosing things, saying, "That'll be a gas!" that it has irritated Milly. In the bathroom upstairs, the couple picked out a wallpaper with obscene words printed all over it. Combma had said, "It doesn't matter. We're selling stuff so we can make commissions, nothing else! The main thing is to get it done! They'll spend more time at some restaurant disco bar than at home. They wouldn't like it if you made it 'tasteful.'"

"But they're buying your taste," Milly had protested. "I mean, why would people come here instead of going to Sears?"

"We want to *be* Sears. 'Taste's a bugaboo!"

Heck had looked at Milly, his bearded face turned quizzically to one side: a look that said, Pretty, but dumb.

"Help!" Milly says to a man tacking a four-by-eight Luau

mahogany panel to the studs of the family room. "Can you lend me five dollars?"

"I guess you do want help. Lady, you *need* help. Perfect stranger—I'm not even sure you're perfect—wants five dollars. Most wives are satisfied with four."

"Oh, please! I'm the decorator here. I'll give it right back. It's for the cab."

"How you going to give it right back if you ain't got it now, and as far as I can see you're the only one of your kind here presently?"

"But I have my samples. You know I'm not going anywhere."

"Lots of people say that; then when they get there they act like they don't know you. Specially if they owe you money."

Milly just looks at him.

"Look," the man says. "We'll take up a collection." He taps his hammer for attention, and comes back from the plumber and another carpenter with two one-dollar bills and from a man working in the yard another dollar's worth of change. "All I can do. They have to get home or buy lunch."

She takes the money outside, having run a kleenex over the banana bills. It made a color—Banana-mana, she thought. The cab driver is unpleasant.

"You've got my name, driver's license number: here's where I work, where I live. I'll send the money. Two dollars!" He puts her remaining samples out on the ground and gunned the cab, leaving her to breathe the dust and fumes.

Milly picks up the samples and goes inside. The carpet-layers, like brain surgeons, are keeping their hours and haven't arrived. She has nothing to do. She had left her carpet sample on Combma's assumption that the men would be here.

"Promises, lady," the man who'd taken up the collection said. "If you believe in them they put you in debt or you wind up married. A short audit's the way to go!"

She looks at him. He is pretty in a discreet way. The light from the windows—they haven't put up the curtains yet—shines behind him and catches the gold in his hair. He makes her want to give her opinion, something Combma (and her mother) had said never to do.

"I submit it's the business approach that's put us where we are today," she says, speaking rapidly. "My mother used to say there was an ad on TV, Texaco or somebody, that said if you drove up and nobody came out to wipe your windshield in 30 seconds, they'd give you a *free* tank of gas. Now you drive up a bandit's sitting behind a bullet-proof glass, the price's quadrupled and they try to sell you *air*. Please don't call me lady!" She is red

and out of breath, angry with herself for associating change with wrong, and for opening up to a stranger. She is suddenly very tired of people doing things for money, tired of not having any money herself.

The innocence of his eyes makes her shiver. She wants to violate it and respect it at the same time. The gap that separates him from her, his education, or lack of it, the breakfast she ate—the banana or the oatmeal with the wheat germ and yogurt that would be poison to his taste—opens before her like a canyon. She imagines his meals, fast food, fried, his loves, fast, too, the bathroom where he discharges his food, the time it spent passing through the long coils of his body. Her eyes come back to his face, handsome, free from malice. He seems to expect to be duped in this world by somebody quicker, smarter, just as she expected to be manipulated by Combma, or, the thought struck her, Hunter.

What do we have in common? she asks herself staring, suddenly too close, at the carpenter. She sees he has a drop at the end of his nose. Her nose runs perpetually, too.

He is close enough for her to smell his breath. “You know that Kenny Rogers song?” he asks. Except for his smile, a kind smile that means no harm, she almost asks him if he knows the Mozart Quintet in A-flat major. “‘You Decorated my Life.’”

“Yes,” she says. “My husband says I should start on our apartment.”

“What a time to bring *him* up,” he says.

MILLY FEELS she has to justify her being there, looks away, and wanders outside, trying to cheer herself up with the unexpected pleasure of having nothing to do as one time she had found solace in being too busy. Work was the end, she thought, the ultimate end that comforted people, gave them the excuse for thinking about anything else: work was a gap, though, ever-widening, which decreed that one profession couldn't sit down with one another. She wants to be inside, with the carpenter, disproving her theory; she wonders why she thinks it would be wrong.

“I applaud the gap,” her mother would've said. “that separates. I'd hack away, make it wider.” Her mother had become, in middle age, a lawyer, would always speak from the bar, delight in putting people in ordinary conversation on the witness stand. “Where were you the night of the 31st?” meaning “Why weren't you capable of bettering yourself as I have?” Milly wondered whether interior decorating would give her a similar satisfaction. Would she always be making distinctions narrower and narrower until she wouldn't break bread with somebody whose curtain color clashed with her carpets?

She hears the carpet truck. She remembers towns in Georgia, mill

towns with their pitiful peacock pattern chenille bedspreads for sale hanging out on clothes lines. Now those towns, their mills, made wall-to-wall carpeting. Square miles of it. Houses had no floors. Lady clients sniffed when she suggested oriental or area rugs, "But this house has no floors!" trying to mean something more, that civilization "these days" had no floors. There were floors, though. Levels. Solid, flat areas over which other things were built. Floors did not have to have the same finish, or polish; not every floor had to be parquet.

The man inside, Greg, he told her his name was, is standing on a floor. Gentle, humorous, capable of seeing the sufficiency of daily bothers, he would outlast Hunter's romanticism, her sense of duty, her mother's political snobbery. Why, she wonders, resist something that gave her pleasure—Hunter was prowling the backroads, wasn't he?

SHE HOLDS THE PAINT CHIPS against the carpet. She asks the men to stand by the window to see the effect in light and with their backs turned, shadow. She always took a light-meter with her to judge brightness and reflected intensity in certain months for big jobs, times of day for small. "That color that looks so nice in January will be a furnace in July!" Combma warned her. Milly puts the fabric samples against the paint and then against the panels and finally next to the carpenter, Greg's, skin to see if it makes him look green or jaundiced. Flat paint chips, demi-gloss, enamel, made everything look a different way. "Ninety-nine percent of the decisions in life don't make any difference," Combma told her, "just make them quick."

Milly goes upstairs to the bathroom, and holds a chip against her cheek in the medicine chest mirror. Behind her, she sees the obscene wallpaper words swelling, threatening. The couple had said they hesitated between the words of another paper with sexual intercourse positions on it. The bed—"The first thing we bought!"—was enormous. She hears a truck start up outside—the carpet people!—and drive off. She runs downstairs. "But I was supposed to ride back to town with them!" she cries to the carpenter.

He says, "Did you bother to tell them?"

They had laid the rug, saying they'd come back tomorrow to finish tacking it down and to put in the thresholds. She stares at Greg over the new carpet, wide and green as a meadow. Tears glisten in her eyes. Her day, she reflects, isn't being nice. Impulsively, she lies down. The carpet's newness, evenness, has the effect of an eraser on the morning. He lies down opposite her. His eyes that were another color before she went outside are green now. Sex does not call to her; something better whispers, an attraction outside of husband or lover or act.

“Ride with us,” he says. “We don’t go all the way, though.” She can smell the starch in his work clothes. His breath is unaffected by gum or mouthwash, his teeth absurdly perfect. The smile has no purpose, is gift and offer.

She waits, it seems, forever, for Greg and his friend to finish. They describe their work as “finishing work.” “It’s not fancy work; it’s straightening out, finishing up what’s unfinished. They can’t use a spirit level anymore. “The bubble’s in their brain these days,” the friend says. There it was again, Milly thought, “these days.” Everybody condemned but what did they do to set it right, level?

THE MAN WHO DRIVES, Greg’s friend, jerks his head towards the back of the truck. She gets in with her books, feeling like cargo.

“We always sit in front, our trusty tool box between,” he says. He pats the metal tool box, then opens it. She sees a plastic baggie filled with marijuana inside.

To avoid the wind, she scrunches down behind the little cab, her samples clutched to her breast to keep them from blowing out the back. She looks into the cab. The two men are passing a toke back and forth. Greg turns around to her and winks, offering her the cigarette in dumb show. Her hair blows into her eyes. Why would they want to feel high in a truck? Is it a reward? For their work? A prelude to something they are going to do that night? The ride is violent and rough. She has nothing to hold onto. The truck lurches along from one side to the other of the dirt road between the lake and the highway.

When they reach the pavement, he speeds on. They are talking to each other more and more, gesturing to her in the back, mile after mile, paying less and less attention to the road. She bangs on the window telling them to be careful. She sees the stop sign, remembers it from the taxi ride. The truck ploughs through, stopping only when it thuds into a maroon Toyota. Thinking she is dead, flattened to a wallpaper pattern, Milly in a second mind watches a perfectly dressed little man emerge from his crumpled car. She sees he is untouched by the damage to the car.

“You should watch where you’re going!” he says, his voice calm, polite. The reprimand is contained and reasonable. In a few minutes Milly hears a lone siren. A convenience food store seems almost to exist for the convenience of somebody’s calling the ambulance. When the siren ceases, she sees it isn’t an ambulance but a wrecker, the machine receiving precedence while the body waits in vain for care. Slowly she realizes she wasn’t wallpaper, that she is alive, uninjured. Greg and the driver are out of the truck, all right, too. The only damage is the little car. In the crowded scene—spectators from the convenience store, the wrecker and now the emergency unit—the crum-

pled maroon car seems a pool of blood. Jostled, she imagines Hunter, at that very moment, daydreaming over some strange plant he can't wait to identify, careening into a similar foreigner.

Greg helps her down. "Far as we go," he smiles. His handsome face is skinned across the nose. The drop still trembles at the end. Milly climbs back up in the truck and gets her samples. "Look, if you ever have a free afternoon," he says, disregarding the accident. "There're always empty houses we're working on. Sheet rock for sheets."

She thinks of the long walk back to Combma's and begins to cry. When she and Greg had lain on the new carpet there seemed something beyond his propositioning her. She wonders what she was holding out for: this crash in a pick-up truck, her empty pocketbook, the long walk back, no Hunter to go home to, the samples to lug? Combma would charge them against her salary if they were lost. She looks at Greg. He stands there, the softness of the drug misting over the damage to the Toyota. Their negligence. "No one was hurt," he says. She doesn't say anything. Couldn't he see somebody was? Hunter finding more pleasure in looking for plants than he did in coming home to her? Combma, discharging her human obligation in the arms of her lover, being less than civil to Milly? Saying no to Greg was a choice for none of these people—her mother, Hunter, Combma, Greg himself. They had such decided minds. He smiles, keeps on smiling. She thinks of how little sex has to do with a woman's taking a lover. Other people wanted her to have a life like theirs. She knows they would no longer need her if she became like them, though, and she would not need herself. It was a smile she would remember, and she thinks that was maybe as bad as taking his telephone number or going with him to an empty house.

She begins to walk. She feels stiff in her knees and elbows. The awkwardness of the sample books reminds her of making decisions quick—Combma's advice. She thinks of people having a good time and disregarding the consequences. She wishes she could bring herself to imitate them, is upset she doesn't know quite what she would do if she let herself go, is distressed the consequences of what she's just done aren't visible. She feels lonely and wrong.

Combma's house is dim inside—no lights, cars, Combma's or Heck's. Milly has a key; she pushes it into the lock after ringing the bell a long time.

She takes off her shoes, puts down the books she has wanted to throw in the street, sees the clock and in the mirror, herself, and realizes that time and the accident have had an effect on her. In the glass she sees Hector Bostrom, shirtless, draw himself up the way someone might turn in the mirror to show a better profile. Her hair surprises her, more than he does, makes her think she's a different

person, that he won't respect the person she was.

"Comb's not here," he says, friendly, as if the news will please Milly. "I didn't go into work today."

"We owe this taxi driver two dollars," Milly says. "Here's his address."

"Where's the two?" he asks coming towards her, his stomach sucked in. It reminds her she hasn't eaten. She thinks vaguely she should take a job as a clerk-typist. There's been an ad in the university gazette. She could make more and never miss lunch. It wouldn't contribute to a career, but what, she thinks at this stage is experience worth?

"I don't have it," she says.

"Oh, you have it, all right," he says, "if anybody has it. She doesn't treat you right, does she?" Milly is miffed with herself for not being afraid of him, puzzled he finds her attractive this way when he hasn't before, her hair kinked, her eye shadow smudged from the ride in the truck and the accident. She is annoyed he isn't loyal to Combma, for whom she feels pure hatred now. She despises Heck for depleting her supply of surprise and romance, the things she can fantasize about. He and Greg now seem to be bending to some duty rather than wanting her, as if not making passes was a surrender of masculinity. "It's not just that they're men," her mother had advised, "It's that you're a woman." For that people had parents.

Slowly she sets the sample books back in their place, checks off the job report and places the heavy crystal hand paperweight on the name of the taxi driver. She puts her shoes back on and says goodbye, demanding with a straight-in-the-eye look at Heck just what she is resisting and if merely sex, wondering why she should be put to the test by people unqualified to teach.

THE WALK BACK to the apartment is painful. A sore throat threatens with time lost, flu, not being able to boost Hunter when he says, "I should go back to work instead of trying to be a green thumb. Even if I graduate where're we going to get the money to start up?"

She opens the apartment door, goes straight to the refrigerator. Enough orange juice for one glass. She washes down an aspirin with it. She and Hunter were going to the grocery store when he got back.

The phone rings, the ring of having tried before. Hunter.

"The car broke down," he says.

"Hunter?"

"Well, there're some *Helleborus foetida* growing around this house in the little town—you know—Summerson? The people who own the house—I had a hard time finding them—said I could dig up

all I want. But it got dark. I'm at a motel," he said sheepishly. "I'm going to get up really early and I'll be there when the stores open. We'll get the groceries. Are you all right?"

Stinking hellebores, Milly thinks. What a name for a plant.

In a little room between the bathroom and their bedroom where the house has been cut up into apartments, Milly takes off her clothes. They always take off their clothes before they go into the room. They want nothing in the room but themselves and their bed. She has covered the ceiling with phosphorescent stars and moons. It is like being in the sky at night. She takes a hot bath and goes into the bedroom. The lampshade is lined with pink cloth to make the light warm. The counterpane is an old quilt his grandmother made fifty years ago to look like a garden of roadside flowers. Hunter says he can never be unhappy in this room. Milly lies down, her throat aching, her bones sore, and thinks she will try.

Landslide

BENJY GRIFFITH

His leathery hand frails
the 5-string banjo,
both boots flap
with the loose boards
on the front porch.
He hunches over the banjo
and shuts his eyes as if
to offer this mountain something
it could never repay.
His cupped fist pounds out
the melody of a steady March sun,
pulling the cold mountain stream down
from the peaks to hum past the oak tree
he has chosen for his sleep.
As the song begins to fade
from his fingertips,
I turn from his worn body and
follow the snake-rail fences
down the mountain and
out through the bottom land,
running as if
they would never find
the end that is always there.

Jap Lover

KEN GAERTNER

BARNEY'S HEELS were on the desk as he watched the lot for customers.

A young man suddenly appeared and stood looking at a '79 Datsun. It looked as if he'd crawled down the row of cars and then stood up.

Barney threw his feet down, pulled his pants up, and went out to the lot.

"Quite a day," he said, looking up at the blue sky approvingly. His pants slid back and settled low on his hips.

"Don't give me any of that weather shit," the young man said. "I ain't here to buy the weather."

Barney blinked.

"How much for this hog?," he asked. His long blond hair was parted in the middle and partially hid the pockmarks on his cheek.

Barney smiled.

"That's one of our better deals," he said.

"Because it's one of your better deals don't mean it's a good deal."

"This one is a fine deal."

"How much?"

"Thirty-five hundred."

"Shit," the kid said. "How dumb do you think I am?"

"I don't think you're dumb."

The kid tried to bend and look under the car at the muffler, but his jeans were so tight he could only bend enough to look at the bumper. His legs were thin enough to use as golf clubs. They looked to be about two-thirds the length of his body.

"Three years old is when they start having problems. Them radials?," he asked.

"Yes," Barney said.

The kid kicked the door with the toe of his cowboy boot.

Barney put his hands up.

"Hold it a minute. Just a minute. The car isn't a football."

"It ain't a gem either."

"I don't think you should kick the car. Not even if you bought it."

Cars aren't built to be kicked."

"What are you sellin' these Jap cars for anyway? Them buck-toothed bastards killed my grandpa."

"That happens in a war."

"Ain't it a bitch. Now everybody's buying their damn cars and putting each other out of work." He grinned crooked, unbrushed teeth, yellow, almost furry with mold.

Barney knew the kid didn't have the money to buy the ashtray out of the car.

"You got about the worst-looking cars in town," the kid said.

"We don't force people to walk on our lot," Barney said.

"Nobody makes me do nothin'," the kid said, staring Barney right in the eye.

What was Barney to say to that? Certainly he didn't want to make the kid do anything except go. Which was probably what the kid meant nobody was going to make him do.

"I'll tell you what," the kid said. "I'll think it over."

Barney hadn't a thing to say. He acted as if the kid wasn't there. He kept looking at the Datsun as if he was the one who was considering buying it and couldn't make up his mind.

"But it ain't likely I'll buy no Jap car," the kid said. "In fact they oughta crush up all the mothers and the ones that sell em and all the politicians that let em sell em."

He backed out to the sidewalk, spun quickly around, and walked up the street, stepping high as though he thought the ground was higher than it was.

Barney went back to the shack, and when Carl relieved him, he walked up to the Nine Dine for lunch.

HE TOOK HIS REGULAR STOOL at the counter. He kept his hat on. The menu was written in white plastic letters stuck in black felt. It was the same every day, but he always peered up at it as if he expected to find something new written on it.

"You decided?," the waitress asked.

"BLT on toast," he said.

"Whole wheat?"

"Yes."

He heard the scraping of the spatula on the grill, plastic dishes rattling on trays, three or four low conversations, then, "Shit—ain't it the Jap lover. They oughta shoot all them teathy bastards. And all the politicians that been bought off by em. Washing. . .ton D.C. ain't washing nothin' but a ton of dirty lies."

Barney didn't answer him.

"I wouldn't sell none of their damn cars," he said, sitting at the counter. "'Cause they killed my granddaddy. He was a good

American.”

“If people run their mouths too long and too loud they can get in a lot of trouble,” Barney said, remembering how the kid had backed away at the car lot when he’d showed some spunk. He leaned towards the kid, the way a man might lean if he had a gun in a shoulder holster.

“I wouldn’t love no Jap. Can’t run my mouth about that too much,” the kid said, looking around.

Nobody paid him any attention. Most of the customers were eating their bean soup and hamburgers as if they didn’t really have a lot of feeling about the Second World War.

“I got three brothers laid off,” the waitress said.

“Send ’em to Tokyo for their unemployment checks,” the kid said. “President Ray Gun ain’t gonna give em none.”

“How come you know so much?,” Barney asked him. “You ever been to D.C.?”

“No. I ain’t been there. And don’t want to.”

“I been there and I’m telling you you ought to go before you start insulting real heroes.”

“Shit.”

“I’ve seen them all. Every Federal building there is, every monument. They didn’t carve them in stone for traitors to spit on.” Barney tugged on the brim of his hat as though by tightening down his hat he was tightening down his facts.

“Hey man, who you calling a traitor?,” the kid blinked pale eyelids.

“If the shoe fits.”

The customers showed mild interest. If it was the bar they were sitting in they’d have been more interested. But a lot of guys had arguments at the coffee counter and nothing ever happened except once the sugar got spilled.

“Something’s got to be done,” the waitress said. “I can’t support every relative I got in this town.”

“Tell Hirohito to support them,” the kid said. “He owns the car companies. They think he’s God. Like we used to think Ford was.”

“We’ll pull out of this,” Barney said.

“Yeah when we go to war. That’s what’ll happen. They’ll start a war to get things humming again. They always do.”

Barney knew there wasn’t anything to say to a know-it-all like him. He’d been around too long not to know that. But damn, it was grinding him. He’d like to put the kid in his place.

“I don’t make the damn cars. I only sell them,” he said. “And I don’t even sell them new. I only sell what somebody else once bought from somebody else.” He didn’t like justifying, but if you did business in a town you had to watch your reputation, you had to make sure

there were no misunderstandings.

The kid got quiet after that piece of information.

"Strung out," Barney thought. "He's got to be a dope addict. Look at him stare in the damn mirror."

But suddenly the kid reached in his boot and stuck his arm straight out, looking as if he was going to shoot himself in the mirror with the littlest pistol Barney had ever seen.

Nobody else noticed at first. Then Barney looked at the waitress to make sure she saw the same thing he saw. She did. Her mouth was slightly open. The kid's long skinny arm swung around towards her. Then she was looking straight into the pea hole of a barrel.

Barney was dumbfounded. He was tempted to throw himself at the kid, the pistol being so small it didn't seem like it could do more than sting somebody.

"I ought to blow you all away," he said, swinging his gaze to Barney. "Ain't none of you worth a shit. You'd sell this country for two ants any day of the week."

Nobody knew what to say.

"Take your hat off," he said to Barney, still aiming at the waitress. "Ain't you got no manners?"

Barney reached up real easy. The kid was crazy enough to think he was drawing on him and shoot him. He eased his hat to the counter.

The kid slammed his pistol against the counter, and leaned on it. "You got the ugliest damn head I ever seen. I threw better potatoes than that in the ditch."

He looked at the waitress.

"If my head was that ugly I'd keep my hat on too," he said.

Barney thought of how ugly the kid's face was and how he ought to cover it up. But he didn't say anything.

"Come on honey. Get the money," the kid said, motioning with the pistol. "I ain't waving this around 'cause it's a flag." She eased over to the cash register.

The kid looked at the money she put on the counter in front of him. "Ain't anyone here the last of the big spenders," he said, spinning around on his stool and putting the pistol in his lap. "Are you?"

"No. We ain't that," an old man said.

"No, but you mothers got the money to buy them Jap cars," he said. "If I had my way, none of you would ever get any money again. Them yellow bastards killed enough of us. They owe us."

"I drive a Ford truck," the old man said. "Always have. Always will."

"There!" The kid looked around. "There's a patriot." He grabbed a bill from the counter, walked over to the old man's table, and laid

five dollars in front of him. "You go on and eat your soup," he said. "Ain't nobody gonna mess with you. I'll see to that." He looked over at Barney as if Barney was the one he would guard the old man against, as if Barney was going to try and argue him into buying a Japanese car.

"Put your hat back on," he said. "I can't stand looking at your noggin. It's shaped like a potato I threw away."

Barney sat his hat firmly on his head.

"I'm making tracks," the kid said. "But I feel a lot better since I met one patriot."

He stuffed the money in his pants pocket and walked out with his funny walk.

BARNEY WAS ANXIOUS to get back to the car lot to tell Carl what had happened, but he waited until the cops came so he could make sure they got a good description of the kid.

When he got back to the car lot Carl was staring glumly out the window.

"Wait'll you hear what happened," Barney said. "You won't believe it."

"If it's good news don't tell me," Carl said. "It'll make me jealous. And if it's bad don't tell me. More bad news I don't need."

"Some S. O. B. robbed the Nine Dine."

"Some S. O. B. robbed me. That's bigger news."

"Robbed you."

"That's right. The prick."

"A scaggy guy? With a little gun?"

"With my little brain."

"What are you talking about?"

"I let him test drive the Datsun. He never brought it back. I could tell by looking at him he didn't have the price of a bus ticket. Why I let him drive it away I'll never know."

"A skinny guy, With stringy blond hair?"

"I've mopped floors with cleaner mops than his hair. And you could have greased all the cars on this lot with what you dug out of his face. People like that disgust me."

"I bet that's him."

"Skinny bastard—looked like he was wearing his young brother's jeans."

"He's the same guy that stuck up the Nine Dine."

"Busy bastard."

"He was here earlier. Gave me a hard time. For selling Japanese cars."

"He stole a Datsun. What's that make him?"

Barney's face reddened. He could hardly absorb the thought.

“That’s right. He stole the Datsun. If that doesn’t take the cake. And him putting me down all day for selling Japanese cars.”

“Twenty years ago they’d have caught someone like him and buried him six feet under.”

“Why shouldn’t they. He ain’t worth a thimble of flea piss.” Barney shook his head. “Stole the Datsun.” He couldn’t think of one manly trait the creep had showed. Not one. He’d never met anyone in his whole life who didn’t show one manly trait. And how many times had he been insulted? He hoped the police caught him in a hurry. Too bad he couldn’t be tried in another country. When you had enough of some people you had enough.

The Birthday Party

EMILY KELLER

The car is heavy with beauty queens,
teen-aged confections,
squealing with tires,
bowling us over with low scores and laughter.
Arrival. The house is a pizza palace
about to rise on balloons,
held by untied ribbons.
My child in the midst, a yearsend gift,
fragile under her chimes,
vulnerable as a fruited tree.
I give her—
oh, all my love and all my hope.
Enough, enough—
I want to cry into roses on paper plates,
Stop—stay as you are—
Hopeless blasphemy.
The sun never listens, anyway.
Instead, my dear, let’s look on this moment,
a candle of pure content,
and I’ll add to your wishes blown wild
my own for new, happy times.

Lady

Nancy Ann Fox

Agreement gendered
in averted evening light
poses politely.

Clockworks

DULCY BONCIOLINI

IT'S JUST A LITTLE AFTER THREE in the morning. Seven minutes after, to be exact. I've been watching this clock a lot today, because it's the first one I've ever had. You know how it is when you've got something new, how you're always kind of intrigued with it until the newness wears off. Then you wonder what you ever saw so special about it in the first place. But this clock will always be special to me. I'm sure of that.

I've been winding it every hour, just a twist or two, to make sure it keeps going. And I can feel the tightness of all the metal parts inside, all the notches and grooves. There's so much tension in it that it seems to be almost alive. At least it seems that way to me. And it makes me feel not so alone, to have that feeling in my fingers when I twist the key around. I would take it quite personally if its inside parts stopped ticking.

I feel like my insides are wound even tighter than the springs in this clock, but I know there's nothing wrong with feeling this way. The lady who gave me the clock, her name is Miss Valentine, told me just this morning, "Don't be surprised if you have some days of feeling very lost and frightened. It's to be expected."

Miss Valentine doesn't look at all like her name. A name like that should belong to a person who's sort of round and soft-looking, with breasts like satin heart-shaped pin cushions and skin that's white and velvety and healthy red cheeks. Miss Valentine isn't anything like that. Her face looks as if it was poured into a perfectly rectangular box and then left to harden overnight. People can't help but stare at her when they first meet her. She's just got more bones sticking out of her than ten people put together. And the skin at the top of her nose and on her forehead is so dry and pinched together that it looks like old parchment that's been wrinkled in someone's pocket for years and years and then straightened out again. It's quite unnatural looking, to be honest. The rest of her is pretty much the same. But none of it's her fault. I will say this about her: she has very beautiful eyes. And a voice like honey.

I didn't like her for a long time. She's what people call a "social worker," which is quite difficult to figure out. For the last month,

before I moved into this rooming house just this morning, she would knock at my door every day at 11:00 and ask me to go with her to the little office at the end of the hall. And she always wanted to talk about the same things that everybody's been wanting to talk about lately. And it used to make me so mad that I would feel like screaming and kicking the walls, and breaking her glasses and pulling out great handfuls of hair from her head. But of course I couldn't really do any of those things, not when I was so close to winning. I had to be nice and I had to be "appropriate" and I had to say "Yes, Miss Valentine" and "No, Miss Valentine" and "Of course I will think about that, Miss Valentine."

You see, she was trying to teach me about life and living all in one month. And I could never get my point across to her, that I knew a lot more about living than she could ever have imagined. And so it ended up just making me madder and madder all the time.

One of the doctors said just last week, "Is it possible that you are taking some of your fear, which is a very natural response to your situation, and turning it into anger, because anger is more acceptable to you than fear?" And I thought about that for a while. He might have had something there, but I'm not too sure. What I mostly objected to was everyone's attitude that just because people had always taken care of me, I wouldn't be able to take care of myself.

But I've always known a lot more than people have given me credit for.

SEE, YOU GET TO KNOW about a lot of things that most people don't ever get to know about when you spend the whole first twenty-four years of your life in an institution. Especially when you're all by yourself, in your own little world that no one can even come close to. It was the kind of world where no one ever listened. I used to ask anyone who looked like they might pay attention to me, when I was about eight or nine years old, "What is wrong that I am here?" And they would pat me on the head, if they were feeling generous or if one of the doctors happened to be looking. They always had the same answer, just changing the words: "Don't you worry your little head about it. We're going to take care of you."

And so what was I to do? I used to look at the other people coming, going, mostly staying. And I would say to myself, "I'm one of them." But I always knew that I wasn't quite the same as half of those zombies, because my mind was always thinking and my eyes were always looking and I learned how to read and write though no one bothered to teach me. And shouldn't that have counted for something?

Well, it counts for something with me. Let me tell you about this. One time, about four years ago, my period came in the middle of the

night, and of course I didn't have anything to take care of it with. So I got up and walked through a maze of beds as quietly as I could, so as not to wake anyone up, and went down to the end of the hall, to the nurses' room. I was afraid to do it, because no one was supposed to leave the dormitory after 11:00. There's an awful lot to be afraid of in places like that, things you wouldn't even think about unless you had the experience for yourself.

Anyway, I got to the nurses' room and knocked on the glass window. It was one of those windows that you only see in institutions: two thick pieces of glass separated by a layer of chicken wire, reminding us all that we were dangerous to ourselves and others. It makes me laugh, now. We let the staff think we were a bunch of dangerous animals because it was expected. In truth, we were about as dangerous as little wind-up rabbits whose inside parts have been scrambled around once too often and who keep teetering off the sides of tables.

Well, I looked in that window, and there was the fool nurse who had given me the wrong pills once and nearly killed me, kissing and hugging that lazy orderly who pounds on the doors every morning before the sun is even up. I could see right away that they were angry at me for interrupting them. But blood is blood, and it was running down my legs and puddling on the floor. So this fool nurse came out and looked me square in the middle of my forehead and said, "What *is* your problem?" And I said, in my most respectful voice, "If you will look a little further down, you will see the nature of my problem." That shook her up a little. First of all, the mess. Second, the fact that I could talk like a regular person. It always seemed that the nurses and the orderlies felt more comfortable with patients who could only hum or make gurgling baby sounds. Another thing, they were always suspicious, especially the nurses, whenever a patient asked them for something. They always thought we were trying to rip them off—as if a little box of cotton could be anyone's ticket to happiness or freedom.

Anyway, she could see it was the real thing. And all she really cared about was getting rid of me in a hurry so she could go back to what she had been doing. I saw that gray look in her eyes. And I remembered the year before last, when she had accused me in front of the night doctor of stealing pills and swallowing them to make myself sick. Actually, I had just swallowed the pills she had given me, feeling too tired and worried to argue with her. I ended up spending nine days in the padded room for that fool's stupidity. And she knew it. But the doctor had just patted my head and said, "We're going to take care of you, Honey. We're not going to let you hurt yourself again." And then he winked at her in that way doctors and nurses have that ignores a patient's feelings altogether, and said, "I think she needs some time in the quiet room, don't you?" And so that's where I spent nine days.

Nine days! And I'll tell you, life's too short to spend even one day of it in a room like that. I read those words somewhere, "life's too short."

What I started to tell you about was writing and reading, and how it counts for something with me. You see, I wouldn't know anything about myself if I didn't know how to read.

What happened is this: that night I was just talking about, when I got my period in the middle of the night, was the beginning of the good part of my life. Just the start, though; it's not all that good yet.

Those two creeps, the nurse and the orderly, went snuggling down the hall together to the supply room, and they sure took their time about it. My eyes were kind of wandering, you know, because I always try to see all there is to see. And I saw this big green book with my name written on it, just lying there on the desk. And of course, I couldn't take my eyes away from it. I wanted to see more. I wanted to see the writing inside. After all, it was my name. And besides, I had already been punished once for stealing something; I figured I might as well steal something for real, just to even up the score. So I looked in the mirror that was reflecting down the hall and I saw them taking their sweet time unlocking the supply room door, and I thought to myself, "This is the only chance you'll ever have, so move fast." But I couldn't move real fast, you see because I had to keep my legs together tight so I wouldn't dribble all the way into the nurses' room and leave a trail for them to catch me with. So I just walked from my knees, down, which took a little longer, as you can imagine, and I snatched that green book up in a hurry and put it under my nightgown and went back to standing where I'd been before, all sort of hunched over holding my belly like I had some godawful cramps that wouldn't let me stand up straight.

Well, they finally came back down the hall, laughing and giggling, and one of them shoved the box at me and I said thanks between my teeth and left as quickly as I could. My heart was beating in my throat, I was so scared of getting caught. But I didn't get caught. Isn't that "virtue prevails"? I read that somewhere.

Do you know what it's like, reading about your whole life and what people think of you and who you are and what you are? I felt like a tropical fish in a glass box. And not one of those fancy fish with bright colors and streamer fins, either. I felt more like a flat little Kuhli Loach that stays at the bottom and burrows in the gravel and hides in an underwater castle everytime it gets a chance. See, I know a lot about tropical fish, because every year the Rotary Club used to donate an aquarium. We had them all over the place. At least those little fish had some life in them.

You've got to have a strong mind and a strong stomach in one of

those situations. When I read that book, I almost wanted to be back in that padded room again. I thought I was going to start screaming and not be able to stop until the day I died. I felt like I was having a baby or riding on a roller coaster, although I've never done those things, just read about them. But that was how I felt. My hands were shaking so much I could hardly turn the pages. But I turned them, fast. And I read fast. I kept a picture in my mind of every single page, front and back. I know how to do that, and it's a good thing to know sometimes.

I finished reading the last pages just as the sunlight came through the windows. There were so many feelings flying around me, all at the same time, that I could hardly breathe. I just sat there, on the edge of the bed, and I held on to the metal sides until everything stopped spinning. I remember thinking to myself, after I'd calmed down enough to think again, "This isn't like having a baby after all; it's more like *I'm* the baby being born, and this is what it must feel like."

That might sound pretty strange to you. But, you see, I used to wonder whether or not I even had a mother or a father. No one would ever tell me anything about it, so I started imagining that I had just been born from the dust, or maybe from the gray walls of the building. I think I read something like that, about dust, in The Bible, and it seemed as good an explanation as anything else I'd ever heard.

I can't say too much about any of this, because it still hurts me to think that two people could decide to have a baby and then decide they didn't want it after all. But I found out that I did have a mother, and her name was Rosemary. And even if things are not normal between us, I am still part of her. Somewhere in the world, there are two people, and I am part of both of them. That means that I belong to someone, even if those people don't quite belong to me.

I'm starting to sound a little bit like Pollyanna. I read that book about Pollyanna, and I thought she was disgusting, with all that niceness just dripping out of her like some kind of horrible disease. And I'm sounding nice myself, right now, which is not very honest. I'm not a very nice person, if the truth must be known. Sometimes I have such a fury in my mind that I think the world will disintegrate if I ever start talking about it or let anyone know that it's even there.

That's how I started to feel that morning, after some of the first feelings wore off. There was more anger bubbling up inside of me than I had ever felt before. And then the whole building started shaking so much I thought it was going to crumble to the ground and everyone would be killed. When I realized that it was just me, and not the building, I should have felt better. But I didn't.

It was hard to act normal that day, as you can imagine; but I knew it would take some thinking to get rid of all the evidence, so I had

to keep my thoughts together at least until that was done. I felt kind of bad about destroying that green book. It seemed like I was destroying part of myself. I did take out some of the good pages, the ones that made me feel like a real person, and I put them where no one would be able to find them.

For the next few days, I was like a block of ice. That's one of the benefits of living in an institution: no one thinks twice if you go around acting crazy. My head and my heart, which had never seemed quite connected, felt like they were coming together. It was such a powerful feeling! I wondered if anyone else had ever felt that way before. I made the outside parts of me stop living for those few days, so I could just concentrate on what was happening.

It took four years for me to sort everything out, and for things to fall into place in my mind. I wanted to understand everything.

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS I did was to start working in the doctors' library. Just about everyone in the institution who can manage it is expected to be productive for three hours a day. From the time I was 15, I had worked in one of the gift shops. But when I heard that one of my roommates, who worked in the library, was leaving to live with her brother, I let everyone know that I wanted her job. And since I had more seniority than just about anyone, I got it.

I spent as many hours as I could in that library during the next four years. There were never more than two or three doctors who would stop in during the day, so I had all the time in the world. There were over a thousand books there, and I read every one of them—except for one shelf where all the writing was in letters that I couldn't understand. And every time I closed the cover of a book and put it back on the shelf, I felt that my mind had got stronger. The last thing I read was *The Undiscovered Self* by this man called Carl Jung. I liked him because he wrote about feelings I could understand, like how it felt when he “stepped out of the mist” and realized that he was a whole person, even without his mother and father. I thought about that title all day long after I finished reading it. The undiscovered self. By the time I went to bed that night, I knew the time had come.

So I told this man, a patient who was called a ward representative, that I wanted to talk to the doctor who was in charge of everything in the hospital. And I asked him how I could do that. He told me to go to the ward secretary and request an appointment to see Doctor Epstein. So that's what I did. The appointment was made for Wednesday at 1:00 in the afternoon.

I stood outside his office for an hour, that first time, and he never even showed up. I scratched some bad letters on his door, it made me so mad. I went back and talked to the secretary, and made another

appointment for the next Wednesday.

I wore my best dress that day. The only dress I have, actually. And I brushed my hair, which is quite long, and made it look as pretty as I could. I bit my lips until they were red and slapped my cheeks until I looked quite alive. My eyes are sometimes a giveaway, so I tried to control them to look calm.

I went to Doctor Epstein's office a few minutes early, and he was already there, with the door open. I saw my scratched letters, and I was ashamed of myself for a moment. Mostly, I was just worried that he would know I had done it, and that he might be mad at me before we even talked.

Doctor Epstein is one of those people who smile without ever opening their mouth. It sometimes looks unnatural when people do that. And there was another thing that looked unnatural about him that I noticed right away. His hair is sort of thin and falling out on the top, so what he had done was to comb it all up from the back and the sides like he wanted to look like he wasn't almost bald. I thought it was strange that a doctor would do something like that.

After he shut the door, he pointed to a chair. I think he meant for me to sit down in it, and that's just what I did. I made sure to keep my knees together like a proper lady. Then he went behind his desk, which was all made of glass, and sat down sideways in his chair. He didn't say anything. I started to feel a little worried about who was supposed to say the first word, and then he finally cleared his throat and said, "What is it that I can do for you today?"

As if he had ever done anything for me on any day! That was my first thought. But then I said to myself, "I'm not going to let anything upset me. This is too important and I have waited too long." That calmed me down right away.

I had planned my words very carefully, and had rehearsed them at least a hundred times in the last four years. I was afraid I was going to forget everything, but suddenly I didn't feel nearly as nervous as I thought I would. So I said, "I know it's not part of your job to spend time with the patients. But I think you are the person I must talk to about this, because you are the doctor in charge of this hospital. You see, I was born here, in the old east wing that burned down last Christmas. And I've never left this hospital. In the twenty-four years of my life, it has been my home. I don't know why it has been this way, because hospitals are supposed to be for sick people who cannot take care of themselves. I am not sick, and I would like to be able to take care of myself. I want to leave this hospital."

I stopped and waited for him to say something. He started tapping his fingers on the top of the desk, and I could see him forcing the corners of his lips to curve into a smile. "Do you know how many of

you patients I see every week who think you don't need to be in a hospital? I'd be a wealthy man if I had a nickel for every one of you. But you *are* sick. There's nothing wrong with it. We're here to take care of you. You need to be in a hospital or you wouldn't be here. Take my word for it."

When he said that, I saw sparks behind my eyes. "It seems to me," I said, "that from a legal standpoint, if not a humanitarian one, a person who has shown no evidence of psychopathology in twenty-four years, and whose intelligence is rated at normal or above—even though she's had no formal education—should not be kept a ward of the state against her will. It is not my fault that nothing has been done for me in all these years. But now that I know better, I plan on doing something about it. Either you will help me or you won't. It seems to me that after all these years, it's time I had some help from someone."

I don't know which was shaking more—my voice or my knees. But I was proud of how I said those sentences, and I was glad that I had spent so much time studying the words and practicing them to make sure they were just right.

Doctor Epstein looked at me then, not quite so sure of himself now, and said, "What makes you so sure, little lady, you even know what 'psychopathology' is?"

And I said, "How could I be surrounded by it for twenty-four years and not know what it is? I also know what it is not, and I know that I am not crazy. Under the circumstances, I should be. Doesn't this prove my health?"

He started listening to my words then, so I just kept talking. I told him about all the books I had read in the library, and what they meant to me. I told him about taking that green book from the nurse's desk. I don't think he wanted to believe me, but I kept talking. I told him about the test results and about the yearly evaluation reports and about one doctor's prognosis. I was so thankful that I had decided to save a few of those pages because I was able to say, "If you would like me to go to my room, I could show you a few examples." I think he knew, then, that I was serious.

WELL, THINGS HAPPENED pretty fast after that. The next day I took all kinds of tests. And then several doctors came to talk with me. And then I took some more tests. Miss Valentine started spending a lot of time with me, asking questions about what I wanted to do with my life and where I would live, and if I had any friends or relatives I could stay with for a while. It made me wonder about human nature, to see how people could change so suddenly. I scarcely recognized the nurses and orderlies, they changed their way of treating me so much.

All of a sudden, it seemed like everyone wanted to talk to me and

everyone wanted to listen to me. And I thought to myself, "There must be almost as many hypocrites in this place as there are birds in the sky." No one could understand why I was so angry when one of the television stations sent some people to talk to me. I was in my room when I heard them rumbling down the hall, with their cameras and microphones dragging behind them; and I slammed the door so hard, when I realized what was happening, that attendants from two wards came running to see what was wrong. I just didn't want any part of it. The way I see it, the time for "human interest" was 20 years past. I wasn't going to be any part of helping people feel good that something was being done for some poor girl who grew up in an institution, emphasizing the good and minimizing the reality that no one had helped me for 24 *years*!

And I'm still pretty angry. I thought it would all leave me when I became a free person, but so far it's not that way at all. It's all I can do to keep from breaking every window in sight, as a matter of fact. And I just never know when it's going to come to me. Yesterday afternoon, for instance, I stopped in the grocery store at the corner just to see what it was like. I'd never been in a grocery store before. And there was music playing from somewhere in the store. It was one of those songs that kept getting louder and faster, as if there was excitement in it or fear or anger or something pretty strong and powerful. Well, the song started drifting into me, and then I started drifting into the song, and next thing you know I didn't know which was which. I didn't know if I was a person, standing there in the middle of a grocery store, or if I was nothing but a loud, angry song. I started to feel so confused that tears came to my eyes and I had to hold my arms against myself to keep from bashing everything in sight just so I would know that I was a real person and not an angry song. Then I was mad at myself for acting so crazy. Thinking about that must have done the trick, because I pulled myself together without destroying anything, and I ran out of that store as fast as I could.

So here I am now. The sun has been shining for at least an hour or two. Probably even longer than that, because according to this clock, it's 17 minutes before 11. In seventeen minutes, I will have been a free person for one whole day. But it's not what it seems to be. I'm still a prisoner, in my mind. A prisoner in disguise. And I wonder if everyone is like this, or if it's just me. I might ask Miss Valentine, when I see her. I will be talking to her once a week, for a while, which is something I'm kind of glad about. I have a lot of questions to ask her.

I'm not going to worry about too many things all at once. The time will come for that. For right now, I'm just going to think about the little things people do to stay alive when they don't have someone to take care of them. Once I've figured some of those things out, I might go to school somewhere, because I've never done that and I've

always wanted to. There are so many things I just don't know about. I want to learn how to read faster and how to write better and how to express myself.

But today all I'm going to worry about is keeping this little clock going, the one that Miss Valentine gave me. And if it doesn't tell the right time, that doesn't matter much to me. Time will be what it will be, no matter what this clock says. I just want the clock to keep living. I want to hear its inside parts ticking, and to know that it's still alive.

Envy The Hippo

NATALIE GRACE HALL

Envy the hippo to have such luck.
He spends his life in a puddle of muck,
Fritters his days in the ooze and the slime,
Completely ignoring the passage of time.
He's covered with mud from his tail to his chin,
But his face is a curl with a satisfied grin.
How on earth could the happy ol' hippo be blue
While indulging himself in luxurious goo?
The hippo's not out to impress millionaires
By feigning ambition or putting on airs.
The fact he's a loafer he's quick to admit.
To deny it would make him a big hippo-crit!
Now it's true that the world may be passing him by,
But at least he's not frustrated wondering why!
Success to the hippo is living each day
In a simple and soupy, serene sort of way.
Carefree and cocky, uncut and uncowed,
Never fearing the scorn of the pompous or proud.
If the world gets him down, he can simply submerge,
Escaping it all in a towering splurge!
Is he homely or lazy or sloppy or fat?
What the heck! Other hippos don't care about that!
So why should our blubbery friend give a hoot
When it's obvious *girl* hippos think he's cute?
Awash in his genial watering hole,
The hippo's at peace in the depth of his soul,
Disgustingly free of the cares of the day,
Lazily lolling the hours away.
His baggy, oblivious eyes start to close
As the warmth of the sun brings the hippo repose.
Do you think, as he peers from his puddle of goo,
That the happy old hippo is envying you?

Contributors

After first entering into print in these pages, ROY BENTLEY has finished the M.A. in English and Creative Writing from Ohio University and continues to write productively, moving to a more "direct" image in his poems. DULCY BONCIOLINI lives in Washington, D.C., where she has worked at a variety of part-time writing and editing jobs while pursuing her writing. Her output consists mostly of short stories, but a novel (*Tangled Vines*) progresses as well. GARY FINKB has been writing on a 1982 Pennsylvania Arts Council Fellowship since his appearance in our Spring issue. STARKEY FLYTH has had a story in one of the O. Henry collections and has published stories and articles in *Southwestern Humanities Review*, the *New York Times*, and *Holiday*; a collection of his stories made the semi-finals of the Iowa Short Fiction Awards this year. In the 1970s he worked as a managing editor in the effort to bring back *The Saturday Evening Post*. A graduate of La Salle, NANCY ANN FOX studied with Claude Koch. Her poems have appeared in the 1980 *New Worlds Anthology* and *Encore: Quarterly of Verse and Poetic Arts*. KEN GAFFNER's story "Running Away to Nothing" appeared here two years ago; in the meantime he has placed a long poem in *The New Oxford Review* and three poems in *Interview* (the magazine of the Los Angeles Cultural Center's Institute for the Performing and Visual Arts). He has become an avid student of the short story. BENJY GRIFFITH, another alumnus, raises cattle on his 432 acre farm in Georgia. He also owns a forestry consultant company and teaches part-time at Tift College. NATALIE GRACE HALL lives in Studio City, California. EMILY KELLER has published widely in newspapers and literary magazines. She is an editor for the Mathematics Association of America at the University of Buffalo, where she took an M.A. in English.

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